The Fourth Church Pulpit

HERE ON THIS SMALL ISLAND

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World Communion Sunday

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: James 3:13-18, 2 Corinthians 5:17-20

"All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation."
2 Corinthians 5:18 (NRSV)

The late Dorothy Day was an inspirational woman who founded the Catholic Worker Movement, published a newspaper, established a lay-religious community in the Bowery which ran a soup kitchen where members of the community and volunteers served food to, hosted and ate with the rough, tough street people of Manhattan's Lower East Side, many of them addicted to alcohol or drugs. When she was not traveling, lecturing or writing, she made it a point to live with the community and work in the kitchen. One of her great admirers, and there were many, was Robert Coles, a distinguished child psychiatrist who teaches at Harvard. Coles has written bestsellers about his work with children, children's spirituality and most recently a book about service; why people like Dorothy Day – obviously gifted, bright, an entrepreneurial genius – why she and others like her choose to spend their lives in service, often for low or marginal pay, living far more modest lives than they have to.

In fact Coles used to pile his classes of Harvard students in a van and drive down to New York to see Dorothy Day and talk with her. He thought the experience was an important part of an education.

On one of those occasions, not very long before she died, the students were talking with her and they asked if she ever had any regrets, any second thoughts about how she spent her time, wasn't she even just a little envious of people who lived far more comfortably than she chose to live?

I love her response. Yes, she sometimes had second thoughts and yes, sometimes she simply got weary from all the suffering and hardship. When that happened, she said, she'd take a walk in a pleasant and affluent Upper East Side neighborhood. After enjoying the beautiful brownstones, shops, bookstores, the orderly and pleasant life style, she would begin to see "the doctors' offices, the lawyers, psychiatrists, psychologists, group therapists, Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, lawyers to handle divorce, separation, custody, fights over estates."

And then

> "I decided that it's not heaven on the Upper East Side and hell on the Lower East Side: it's all of us trying to get through this life, and here we've found a way to do this, and I pray for the folk up there. They have more comforts than we do, but they haven't escaped from or lost their humanity ... and they need as many prayers as we do."

Hesed

As the group was preparing to leave, Coles recalled her saying something to the students that gave me the title for this sermon.

> "Here on this one small island in the universe God has put so many of us to live. The earth is an island. Here we believe it would be better if we got to know one another, took an interest in one another, to be *part of a community over a meal,* to serve and be served..." she hesitated a second, then added a very brief concluding remark: "I think Isaiah and Jesus explained all this to us some time ago." [*The Call of Service,* p. 281-283]
>
> "Here on this one small island God has placed so many of us to live ... it would be better ... to be part of a community over a meal, ..."

There is a basic unity, a oneness about the human family. Our poets and artists, our sages and saints and prophets know it. It is one of the most precious images in the Bible. "How good and pleasant it is when kindred dwell in unity." It is, says Professor Doris Donnelly of John Carroll University, God's dream for creation – harmony, unity, oneness – a family. It's the single consistent theme in the Bible from beginning to end. From the Psalter's sweet picture of a patriarch sitting in the midst of a family at peace, to Isaiah's glorious vision of that peaceable kingdom in which the wolf lies down with the lamb, the calf and the lion together: that place and time when no one will hurt or destroy – and "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord..." [Isaiah 11:9b] to the mysterious final vision in the Revelation of John, of "... a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne. ..." [Revelation 7:9] The Bible holds up a stirring vision of the essential unity of the human race: diverse in all its colors and races and tribes and nations, but one in essence, one in fact, one at its most basic level of being.

Bishop Desmond Tutu of the Anglican Church in South Africa, who knows a lot about disunity and the tragedy when human beings and human cultures divide themselves along lines of race and tribe, spoke once on the topic of reconciliation and said the Bible is essentially the story of reconciliation.

> "God sent Jesus who would fling open his arms on the cross as if to embrace us. God wants to draw us back into an intimate relationship and so bring to unity all that is disunited. This was God's intention from the beginning." [*Weavings*, Jan./Feb. 1990]

The unity of humankind. ... It's part of our religious tradition from the start, and it is an image of contemporary relevance.

Lewis Thomas, who was one of the great spirits of our century, a physician, scientist, head of Sloan Kettering Cancer Clinic, philosopher, always sounded like an Old Testament prophet to me, although he would not have relished the title.

> "We are interlocked" he said, "not just made up, as we always supposed, of successively enriched packets of our own parts. We are shared, rented, occupied. I cannot feel as separate an entity as I did a few years ago. We are dependent ... part of the system."

Reflecting on space travel, Thomas writes:

> "Viewed from the distance of the moon, the astonishing thing about the earth, catching the breath, is that it is alive ... this rising earth, the only exuberant thing in this part of the cosmos ... it is far and away the grandest product of collaboration in all of nature." [*The Lives of a Cell*]

Theologian Douglas John Hall, thinking about the same image, suggests only partially in jest, I think, that the most valuable by-product of the entire space program is that picture we have all seen of the earth:

> "A bright, fragile, incredibly beautiful sphere against the black background of infinity." That is a picture of us – and our homes. There are no boundaries, no walls. "There are no moats or oceans broad enough to divide. There are no parts." Just to see that photograph, Hall says, "is to know the truth of Economist Barbara Ward's famous warning: 'You are one world. You must learn how to be one, or else you will not be at all.'" [*The Steward*, p. 127-132]

The great danger, of course, is that we will not know and live out our essential oneness: that we will seek and derive our essential identity from our own race or tribe or religion or nation: that we will construct our emotional and then physical security on the basis of an exclusive racism or tribalism or nationalism – which tells us that we are the best, the elect, the favored ones, and that all the rest are inferior. And so Serbian Christians can kill Bosnian Muslims and Hutus can slaughter Tutsis until the Tutsis are in power and can start to get even; and Northern Ireland Protestant Christians can kill Northern Irish Catholic Christians who after years of killing have agreed to stop and start talking.

The great danger facing our world at the dawn of a new millennium is a rebirth of tribalism, racism, nationalism and a consequent denial of our unity and oneness. Buckminster Fuller coined the phrase "spaceship earth." What he really said is that we are passengers on spaceship earth, but no one seems to have an operating manual.

Sometimes in the political arena those who remind us of our essential humanity that transcends national identity are criticized, scorned as traitors. "One worlder" was hurled around by the far right as a kind of betrayal of one's nation not very long ago. And it isn't a very popular idea today. All the energy is in the local and particular, not the universal. ... Martin Marty said in an essay recently, human history seems to be in the control of some insidious centrifugal force that is causing everything that was united to come apart.

That dynamic, at its worst, is responsible for skinheads ranting and raving and a venomous anti-Semitism that many thought was gone. And sadly – along the racial fault-line that divides our own nation, blacks and whites seem sometimes to be moving away from not closer together. In fact, it is no longer intellectually fashionable to discuss the old goal of integration ... Instead, the focus today is on recovering self-identity by staying with one's own – educationally, politically, socially, religiously.

How God must grieve the continuing divisions within the family.

It is the task of Christian religion – Christian mission – to announce God's dream of a human race that knows about its oneness. It is Christian mission to announce the Good News that God's son was given, lived and died, to heal the division – not only between God and individual men and women, but also to heal the division within the family; that God was in Christ reconciling the world. And therefore it is the highest order of priority to show the world what that looks like.

I suppose there is no greater scandal than the inability – or unwillingness – of the Christian Church to do that. In fact, our disunity is something of a bad joke.

Mark Twain took a dim view of organized religion and this is one of the reasons. One time he described it in a way that has the sting of an Old Testament prophet:

> "I built a cage and in it put a dog and a cat. And after a little training I got the dog and cat to the point where they lived peaceably together. Then I introduced a pig, goat, kangaroo, and some birds, and a monkey. And after a few adjustments they learned to live in harmony. So encouraged was I by such successes that I added an Irish Catholic, a Presbyterian, a Jew, a Muslim, a Buddhist – along with a Baptist missionary ... and in a very short while there wasn't a single living thing left in the cage."

We live in an age of ecumenical understanding and cooperation. In my childhood my Baptist and Roman Catholic neighbors were absolutely certain that the other side was dead wrong and doomed. In fact, the only thing they ever agreed on was that there was positively no hope for us Presbyterians in the middle.

My home was pretty liberal on the topic of who was going to heaven, but my Presbyterian grandmother wasn't. She thought the Catholics were plotting to take over and the Baptists were disorderly rabble-rousers who never learned about God's grace and that heaven was clearly reserved for Presbyterian Calvinists. That day is gone. Almost every Saturday something wonderful happens that was unthinkable not very long ago. Roman Catholic priests and Protestant ministers co-officiate at what we used to call "mixed marriages" which we were warned – on both sides – to avoid at all costs, but now are learning simply to name a Christian marriage. There is a lovely ecumenical dimension to our renovation project. The Fourth Presbyterian Day School program is up and running in the Holy Name Cathedral School; our Social Service Center is in the basement of St. James Episcopal Cathedral; and weekly Fourth Church weddings are taking place at St. James. In fact – I have one next week which will include a Roman Catholic priest: a Presbyterian wedding with a Catholic priest in an Episcopal Cathedral ... a kind of ecumenical extravaganza. Our Cooking for the Homeless and Sunday Night Community Supper is happening at Quigley Seminary – and our Thanksgiving Day Service will be held in the Quigley Chapel.

So we are in a new place – a good new place. Progress has been made. But there is much to be done. In our city there is no ecumenical organization, no council of churches. There is a council of religious leaders which brings bishops and executives together but not parish clergy and lay people. And the simple and tragic fact is that while individual churches and denominations do a lot of good things in and for the city, we don't do much of it together; and so what could be a voice and force for creative and progressive social change – a voice on behalf of the poor, and oppressed, a voice for justice and peace – is fragmented into a chorus of individual voices each singing a different tune.

There is work to be done. Presbyterians cringe when a man who calls himself a Presbyterian minister – he is not and never was a member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) – murders a physician, and Roman Catholics cringe when a priest defends what he did. But the fact remains we have not been able to talk much across the ecclesiastical divide about abortion, and we must find a way to do so.

Sometimes the disunity is within churches. Our Presbyterian family felt like it was going to come apart earlier this year with adversaries shouting at one another about a Conference on Re-Imagining; preparing, everybody knows, for a confrontation over whether or not gay and lesbian persons can be ordained to ministry. Again, we simply must find a way to talk to one another – within our own family, not only to keep the family intact, but far more importantly because God wants us to show the world what that kind of conversation looks and sounds like: how it is possible for a family to stay together in spite of some very real disagreements.

God wants the church to show the world what unity and diversity means: unity not fractured but enriched by diversity. One of the issues which threatened to divide the Presbyterian Church was a disagreement, stemming from the Re-Imagining Conference, over the meaning of the doctrine of Atonement: how it is that we are reconciled with God through Jesus Christ. It was a great moment at the General Assembly of our Church when the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, James Andrews, said:

> "There has been much discussion in recent months about the doctrine of Atonement. Let us recognize that the doctrine makes us at-one with God and with each other through Jesus Christ: and unless we accept that at-oneness it is an irrelevant doctrine for us. Let us recognize that the only way to deny the atonement is to refuse the reconciliation to which we were called by the fact that Christ died for our sins."

The early Christian Church in Corinth had as much trouble with the topic as we do. They weren't sure how they ought to relate to the pagan culture around them and their neighbors who were not believers, and they weren't sure how to get along with one another. In fact, they argued a lot about almost everything it seems: doctrine, authority, the sacraments, who was in charge; in fact they sound like – a church. Their mentor and founder and pastor – Paul – wrote to them when he heard about their difficulties.

He told them that in Jesus Christ something had happened that forever alters the relationship between God and themselves. He uses past tense verbs. Something has already happened: it has been accomplished. ... Everything is new and different now. ... And they – those few humble people in Corinth – and we, we **here on this small island** called earth are its recipients and its agents. It is our job to receive the gift of reconciliation with God and with one another and live the gift and give the gift to a world that needs nothing more urgently.

Listen to the words he wrote to them. May they be for us – God's word – as we, here on this small island come to the table.

> "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." [2 Corinthians 5:17-20]

Amen.